

**LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL**

REVIEW OF CASE SERVICE DATA

**Grantee: Passaic County Legal Aid Society
Recipient No. 331080**

**Report No. AU01-002
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 1999, the Passaic County Legal Aid Society (grantee) opened multiple cases for the same client with the same or related legal problem. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) estimates that 588 cases (about 11 percent) of the 5,227 opened cases were duplicates that should not have been opened. Grantee staff routinely opened cases for clients without determining if the client's legal problem was previously handled. The problem occurred because the grantee did not have procedures for identifying duplicates when individuals applying for assistance were accepted as clients and their cases were entered into the case management system.

The duplicate cases were not detected because management did not adequately review case statistical data for errors prior to its submission to the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). As a result the grantee reported duplicate cases and overstated its workload.

We noted several Private Attorney Involvement (PAI) cases that were recorded twice. One case was opened and recorded in the case management system when the client was accepted. A second case was recorded when the client was referred to an attorney participating in the PAI program.

In addition, a significant number of case files did not contain documentation evidencing that legal services were provided to the client. Fifty-four of 456 case files reviewed lacked such documentation. The case files included the LSC problem code but contained no information indicating that the client was provided legal advice. The problem occurred because the grantee's advocates failed to complete the sections of the case intake forms covering services provided. Supervisory review of the advocates and the case files was insufficient and did not detect the problem.

Recommendations to correct the above problems are on page 6.

BACKGROUND

Passaic County Legal Aid Society is a nonprofit entity organized to provide legal services to indigent individuals who meet established eligibility guidelines. Its priorities include housing, family, public benefits and consumer issues. The grantee is headquartered in Paterson, New Jersey. It is staffed with 14 attorneys, 7 paralegals, and 11 other staff who assist with cases and provide computer, accounting, and administrative support services. The grantee received funding totaling \$2,435,000 in 1999, of which \$369,488 or about 15 percent came from LSC. To satisfy its Private Attorney Involvement requirement, Passaic County Legal Aid Society relies on referrals to private attorneys.

The grantee prepares and submits an annual Grant Activity Report to LSC on key aspects of its workload. The report includes statistics for basic field services and Private Attorney Involvement programs financed with LSC funds, including the number of open and closed cases, types of cases, and the reasons for closing cases. For calendar year 1999, Passaic County Legal Aid Society reported to LSC that it closed 4,852 cases. The grantee kept track of client cases with the Kemps Caseworks "Client for Windows" Case Management System, an automated management information system.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this review was to determine if, during 1999, the grantee opened multiple cases for clients when only one case should have been opened.

The OIG performed this review from September 20 through October 19, 2000, at LSC's office in Washington D. C. and the grantee's office in Patterson, New Jersey.

As part of this audit, we obtained an understanding of the intake process and the procedures for recording data in the automated case management system, including the collection and reporting of data to LSC.

The grantee provided the OIG a listing of all cases opened during 1998 and 1999 from its automated case management system. The OIG selected a random statistical sample of 400 cases from the 5,227 cases opened in 1999. These 400 cases were compared with the listing of all the cases opened in 1998 and 1999 to determine if potential duplicate cases had been opened. This comparison identified 286 cases that appeared to be duplicative of 170 cases included in the random sample selected by the OIG. These 456 cases (170 plus 286) were reviewed at the grantee's office.

Each case file was reviewed with a member of the grantee's staff, usually the deputy director or a supervising attorney, to determine if the grantee had opened duplicate cases. The grantee staff member was asked to provide supporting documentation evidencing that multiple cases had been properly opened for a specific client. During the on-site visit, the OIG interviewed and collected information from the grantee's deputy director, supervising attorneys, staff attorneys, paralegals, intake staff, office manager (information system specialist), and support staff. In addition, the OIG staff reviewed the grantee's 1999 Grant Activity Report, grant proposal, and various other documents.

We performed this audit in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* (1994 revision) established by the Comptroller General of the United States and under authority of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended and Public Law 106-113, incorporating by reference Public Law 104-134.

RESULTS OF AUDIT

Multiple cases were opened for some clients when only one case should have been recorded. In addition, the files for some cases did not contain documentation evidencing that the client was provided legal services.

Duplicate Cases

Cases involving the same client with the same or a related problem were erroneously opened and recorded more than once. The grantee opened 5,227 cases in 1999. The OIG selected a random sample of 400 of these cases. Forty-five cases (11 percent) were duplicates. Based on the sample results, we estimated that 588 of the 5,227 opened cases were duplicates. The following are examples of duplicate cases.

- Case 99-800-3826 was opened on April 6, 1999 for a client with a problem involving AFDC/Other Welfare. The client returned on June 3, 1999 with the same problem. The intake sheet from case 99-800-3826 was photocopied, the case number was scratched out and a new case number 99-800-4700 assigned.
- Case 99-800-4218 was opened on April 30, 1999 for a client facing eviction. The case was closed on September 7, 1999. A second case (99-800-6073) for the client facing eviction from the same residence was opened on September 7, 1999 and closed on November 8, 1999. A third case (99-800-6843) for the client facing eviction from the same residence was opened on October 27, 1999 and closed on November 16, 1999.
- Case 99-800-2694 was opened on January 11, 1999 for a client seeking temporary rental assistance. A different advocate opened case 99-800-2695 for this client on January 11, 1999. This second case also related to temporary rental assistance. A third case (99-800-3317) pertaining to temporary rental assistance for this client was opened on February 25, 1999. An advocate not involved in either of the first two cases opened the third case.

Case Intake Procedures

The grantee did not have adequate procedures for identifying duplicates when clients were accepted and their cases were entered into the case management system. Grantee staff routinely opened cases for clients without determining whether the client had a preexisting case for the same problem.

During client intake, a manual form is completed with basic information including the client's name, address, income, citizenship status and legal problem. This information is subsequently entered into the automated case management system. Clients are not screened during the intake process to determine if they have been provided services for the same or a similar problem during the current year. Such

screenings are relatively easy to do through the case management system and would preclude, or at least reduce the number of, duplicate cases.

The grantee's case management system is capable of electronically identifying all cases opened for a specific client. The system can be electronically queried to determine if an individual seeking assistance had been helped with the same legal problem during the year. If assistance had been previously provided during the year a new case should not be opened. Grantee staff does not use the case management system to determine if a case had been previously recorded for a client. Staff members told us that they had not been adequately trained on how to use the case management system and that manuals explaining its use were not available.

Management Review of Case Statistical Information

Grantee management did not adequately review case statistical data and eliminate duplicate cases prior to submitting the data to the LSC as required by the CSR Handbook. As a result, duplicate cases were not detected and were reported to LSC. One method for reviewing case information is to generate a file or report that identifies clients for whom more than one case was opened during the reporting year. The cases can then be sorted to list clients that had two or more cases with the same or a related problem code. These cases can be reviewed and duplicates eliminated. The CSR Handbook suggests this approach be used to identify duplicate cases. Grantee management did not use the suggested approach to identify and eliminate duplicate cases.

Cases Referred to Private Attorneys

Several of the duplicate cases occurred because PAI cases were recorded twice in the case management system. One case was opened and recorded when the grantee accepted the client. A second, duplicate, case was recorded when the client was referred to an attorney participating in the PAI program. The CSR Handbook specifically prohibits such redundant case recording.

Documentation Of Legal Services

A significant number of case files did not document that the client was provided legal services. Fifty-four of 456 case files reviewed did not include sufficient information to determine whether legal services had been provided to the client. We discussed these cases with attorneys or paralegals on the grantee's staff. These individuals agreed that, for most cases, the provision of legal services was not adequately documented. Improvements are needed in the supervisory review of the advocates and the work they perform. Grantee staff informed us that case files were reviewed as required by procedures. However, the case files we examined generally lacked evidence of supervisory review.

CONCLUSIONS

The grantee needs to adopt procedures that minimize the opening of duplicate cases. These procedures should require grantee staff to determine whether a client's problem was previously handled during the reporting period. Procedures should be improved regarding management's review of case statistical data prior to its submission to LSC. The management review of data should examine multiple cases opened for the same client. In addition, supervisors should review case files to ensure that advocates documented the legal services provided to clients. This supervisory review should be documented in the case file.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The OIG recommends that grantee management:

1. Implement procedures requiring grantee staff to determine whether a client's problem was previously handled during the reporting period.
2. Implement procedures for reviewing case statistical data to detect duplicate cases prior to submitting the data to LSC. The grantee's automated case management system should be utilized to identify multiple cases opened for the same client. These cases should be reviewed and any duplicates eliminated.
3. Implement procedures requiring that cases referred under the PAI program are recorded only once in the grantee's case management system.
4. Implement procedures requiring supervisory review of case files to ensure that the advocates document the legal services provided.

SUMMARY OF GRANTEE'S COMMENTS ON DRAFT REPORT

The grantee's comments stated that some duplicate files had been unintentionally created. The OIG reported finding 45 duplicate cases. The grantee asserted that five of these cases were not duplicates. According to the grantee, in four cases the client was the same but had different legal problems. In the fifth case two different clients were served.

The grantee agreed that, in some instances, case files did not document the legal services provided to the client. The OIG reported that 56 case files did not include sufficient information to determine whether the client had been provided legal services. The grantee's comments indicated that 4 of the 56 cases involved clients who were not provided legal services.

The audit report included four recommendations. The grantee agreed with recommendations 1, 3 and 4. The grantee's response did not address recommendation 2.

The grantee's response also included statements about another New Jersey legal services program and its management that are unrelated to the draft report.

OIG RESPONSE TO GRANTEE COMMENTS

We assessed the grantee's comments and concluded that they did not provide any basis for modifying the audit report. The grantee generally agreed with the draft report but disputed our findings for ten cases. We reviewed the information provided and our work paper documentation for these cases and concluded that our assessment is correct. We did not modify the report and reaffirm our findings and recommendations.

The grantee's response included comments, unrelated to the audit report, that amount to unsubstantiated allegations of wrongdoing by a third party. The OIG does not publish such statements and redacted them from the grantee's comments included in Appendix II.

Please provide a corrective action plan for implementation of the four recommendations. The corrective action plan should include a description of the action taken to implement each recommendation and the date corrective action will be completed.

APPENDIX I

LISTING OF FINDINGS AND ASSOCIATED RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings:

1. Case Management System contains duplicate cases (page 4).
Recommendations #1, 2, 3
2. Legal Services provided were not documented (page 5).
Recommendation #4

APPENDIX III

OIG STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR THE AUDIT AND THE REPORT

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